

GAZELLE

Vol 21 no 12 December 2006



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

DNHG Membership

Barbara Couldrey of RAK had a ringside seat for the rain in the Musandam on National Day weekend. She reports, "I visited Wadi Bih on late Saturday afternoon and found both dams full, even the big one which has now been deeply excavated (there was even a portacabin and a tank floating around!)."



Just beyond the large dam, where the road was badly washed away during a large storm some years ago, the wadi was in full flood and had breached the road in two places. A helicopter evacuation was taking place where several cars were stranded on the mountain side of the road.

rough track across the wadi. The road was already being repaired. However, there was a lot of heavy rain from 7pm last night so maybe the road was breached again. Loads of locals were looking at the water - no expats.



We went back yesterday evening and traffic was flowing again on a



Wadi Kader

Receiving the *Gazelle* is dependent on current membership, and we are now well into the 2006-2007 year, so **those who have not renewed after our January 2007 meeting will fall off the *Gazelle* list then.** Membership remains a bargain at Dhs. 100 for couples and Dh. 50 for singles. You can join or renew at meetings or by sending us a cheque made out to Lloyds Bank account no. 173746. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.)

DNHG membership entitles you to participate in field trips and helps pay for our lecture hall, publication and distribution of our monthly newsletter, the *Gazelle*, additions to our library, incidental expenses of speakers and occasional special projects.

This month's Contributors

The Editor would like to thank the following for their reports and contributions:

Martina Fella
Barbara Couldrey
Gary Feulner
Marijcke Jongbloed
Valerie Chalmers
Angela Manthorpe

Under the patronage of H.E. Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan



Trips planned:

Field Trip with Gary Feulner

This walk will be arranged early in the new year, and details will be made available either by email or at our January 7 meeting

Temple Walk with Sandhya

Bur Dubai is full of surprises!

Wadi Tarabat (below Jebel Hafit) with Val Chalmers

Val is liaising with Brigitte regarding this and no date is yet fixed.

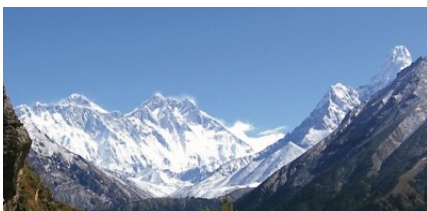
Spoonworms with Hornby Sometime in spring

This trip is tide-dependent, and the tides are not being very helpful. Sometime next year, March or thereabouts, they'll be right, and we will let you know in plenty of time.

And ...

The Trek of a Lifetime!

Mike Lorrigan is planning a trip that he has wanted to do for the past 20 years and is looking for 8-12 willing participants from the DNHG and all Natural History Groups in the Emirates to join him.



Target: Everest Base Camp, Nepal. Starting from the town of Lukla, the party will trek and camp all the way up to Everest Base Camp, accompanied by porters. Most of the walk will be through Sagarmatha National Park. After a short stay at Everest Base Camp, the party will trek back to Lukla. The current proposed dates are late March/early April, but there is flexibility depending on who is interested. The first summit of Everest was achieved by Hillary and Tensing on 29th May

1953, so if people want to be at Base Camp for the anniversary, the trip can probably be scheduled to achieve this, and the dates adjusted accordingly. Mike is flexible.

The basic itinerary is as follows:

Fly from UAE to Katmandu
2 days stay in Katmandu
Flight to Lukla
Overnight stay in Lukla
Trek starts next day. Approximately 6-8 days trekking to Everest Base Camp – depending on altitude acclimatisation of the group.
Arrive Everest Base Camp
Stay at Base Camp one/ two days.
Return trek to Lukla
On arrival in Lukla, one night hotel stay
Fly back to Katmandu
Two nights in Katmandu, including celebratory meal at Rum Doodle Restaurant – made famous by parties from Everest dining there.
Return flight to UAE

Total trip from start to finish ... maximum 23 days. Actual trekking will be between 14 and 16 days.

It is proposed to camp along the way to Base Camp from Lukla and back, so everyone in the party needs their own good quality tent, or share with another. The bulk of your kit will be carried by porters; you will just be carrying a day pack. Very warm clothing and top quality sleeping bag are needed for night time. Overall though, the weather at that time of year is very pleasant during the day, and according to the organizers, crampons will not be needed for boots, right up to Base Camp. You do not have to be superfit for this trek but a good level of fitness is required. A dedicated fitness programme starting two months prior to setting off is highly recommended for anyone interested.

The trip will also include a flight out from Katmandu, with Buddha Air, to see the summit of Everest. Depart from the hotel at 5.00 a.m., back in the hotel by 8.30 a.m. - an amazing experience! Mike has

done this!

If interested, please e-mail Mike on oxymoron@emirates.net.ae. The trip is open to non Natural History Group members if not enough members register.

DNHG Librarian Needed

We continue to need a volunteer to serve as Librarian. If you think you might be interested in spending more time with our books and papers, which are housed at Emirates Academy, please consider this post. It is not too onerous, but is important, as many of the items are somewhat rare and precious. Please contact Gary Feulner or Valerie Chalmers (contact details p.7) if you can help.



Our Next Speaker

Antonius ('Tony') van Harten, FRES, studied tropical agriculture in the Netherlands and worked as an entomologist in Angola, the Netherlands, Cape Verde Islands, Yemen and the South Pacific.

He is a specialist on biological pest control and on the taxonomy of aphids and spiders. In addition, he has done a great deal of work on the global inventory of the terrestrial arthropods in the countries where he resided, especially in Cape Verde and Yemen, collaborating with taxonomists from all over the world.

Since 2004, he has been working in Sharjah on the inventory of the insects and other terrestrial arthropods of the United Arab Emirates.



Fossiling at Ibri

Our fossiling trip on November 24-25 focused on the dramatic ridge and cliffs of the 'Ibri Anticline' which extend more than 50 km south of Ibri. Members arriving the night before were introduced to the Al Majd Hotel Apartments in Ibri, which got good reviews, as did the Indian restaurant across the street.



The Ibri Anticline team

Val Chalmers and Angela Manthorpe had scouted an excellent route through the ridge, giving us access to the entire sedimentary section, from the soft yellow marls near the base, which contained some of the most delicately preserved fossils, to the coarse, nodular limestone at the top of the sequence, which produced a number of 30cm+ ammonites (which we photographed but left in place for the next visitors to enjoy). We were surprised to find that the eastern entrance to our passage through the ridge was overlooked by a natural sculpture of what appeared to be the ancient Egyptian goddess Nefertiti.



Weather-sculpted limestone

Val's sources at the British Museum indicated that this area had

been studied by French researchers and that most of the rocks were Campanian in age, therefore c.83.5 to 71.3 million years old, predating by some 7 to 18 million years the demise of the dinosaurs (along with the ammonites and many other groups) in the end-Cretaceous extinction, now commonly reckoned to have been caused by a meteorite impact.



The biggest ammonite found

Among the fossils we found were many casts of different varieties of gastropods (including the distinctive, large campanellids as well as naticids, cerithids and flattened gastropods, e.g. *Trochacea*); bivalves of various sorts and sizes (including assorted scallops, pectens, cockles and a small number of oyster shells); many specimens of the small irregular sea urchin *Nucleopygus* sp. (a few well preserved); some colonial corals; two nautiloids; a few small, eccentrically coiled ammonites; and a number of larger planispiral ammonites. Val has sent off photographs of the ammonites and nautiloids to the The Natural History Museum in London for further identification.



Ammonite

Among the fossils that were NOT present, although they are common in late Cretaceous sediments in the

UAE and adjacent Northern Oman, were rudists and actaeonellids. It is tentatively supposed that this is because the Ibri anticline sediments were deposited further offshore, in deeper water than the sediments at, e.g., Jebel Buhays, Jebel Rawdhah and Fossil Valley. If they are Campanian, however, they would also be somewhat older than the sediments at the latter sites, which are Maastrichtian (c.71.3 to 65.0 million years old).



Rodney and Gillian Hills with an ammonite

Special mentions go to Di Lazenbury, who spotted the first large ammonite, then several more; Tom Williams who turned up some of the most unusual fossils, including the eccentric ammonites and the most attractive large one (and who admits to a Ph.D. in vertebrate paleontology); and William Pardoe who found the only two nautiloids and seemed to be able to spot fossils almost without looking (and who is still quite a few years from his Ph.D.).

On the final afternoon, the group split up to visit the Bat tombs and the Ibri souk and fort. Another contingent hiked up to the top of the anticline to visit some of the more than 40 cairn tombs in the area. En route, they also chased up several specimens of the diurnal gecko *Pristurus carteri*, which looks and acts very much like an agama, and which is more common in the more southerly regions of Oman.



E.mail your reports to pvana@emirates.net.ae, (Arial 10 justified) or deliver them to Anne Millen on disk at monthly meetings.

Thanks also to Peter van Amsterdam and Anne Millen, who initiated the idea of this trip long ago, and were looking forward to it, but were unable to come along. Report by Gary Feulner, Val Chalmers and Angela Manthorpe

An RAK Mystery

For years now, Barbara Couldery has observed winter deposits of excrement on the RAK 'Police Beach' shoreline. Is it from sheep carrying ships ... no, too large and atypical. Is it human ... no, too consistently the same (dark green) for a mixed diet.



Suddenly last week it occurred to her that as there is sea grass offshore from the Bin Majid beach in Ras al Khaimah, and it could therefore possibly come from dugongs (*Dugong dugon*).



Robert Baldwin tells us that these are relatively primitive mammals whose closest relative, based on similarities of bone structure, is the

elephant! They generally travel in herds. Barbara has not seen one yet, but lives in hope. But ... what about turtles? Thanks, Barbara. Does anyone know the answer?

Hajar Mountain Nature Walk

The wadi was wet, as advertised, and the day was crisp and clear, good for photos. We entered the lower reaches of Wadi Qahfi by a circuitous route that led past cemented gravels, unconformities in the wadi wall sediments, a sampling of the common mountain trees, flowering shrubs with several species of butterflies, and lots of tiny Arabian toads.



Wet walkers in Wadi Qahfi
Photograph by Martina Fella

Once in the main wadi, in addition to trying to keep our feet dry crossing the meandering stream, we were preoccupied by trying to distinguish the four species of wadi fish (three native and one, tilapia, introduced) and the three species of red dragonflies, all of which can be found here. The wadi bed in this area usually features a few juvenile blue rock agamas (*Pseudotrapelus sinaitus*) and we were not disappointed. Several members even spooked a wadi racer (*Coluber rhodorachis*) hunting in a rocky pool, and managed to out-wait it for a second view. A rarer denizen, seen twice, was the giant waterbug (*Lethoceras* sp.), the UAE's largest insect, an awkward swimmer but apparently an effective sit-and-wait hunter.

Richard Dennis and Rachel Raynor scouted an unexplored overland route for part of the return journey and the entire group detoured for

the final stretch to return to the cars via a more diverting canyon wall route.



Oman lizard regrowing its tail
Photograph by Jo Raynor

Rachel won the Chairman's (virtual) gold doubloon for spotting an elusive skink, *Mabuya tessellata*, which inhabits mountain wadis but is very seldom seen. A close runner-up was her mother Johanna's two-tailed Oman lizard, photographed in the early stages of regenerating a shed tail. However, a special award should go to the entire group for 100% attendance and for all showing up not only on time, but comfortably early. A newcomer asked if all DNHG field trips were so punctual (and we said, "Of course."). Thanks also to Clare O'Hare and Martina Fella for sharing some of their photos. Report by Gary Feulner

UAE's Mountain Olives in Poor Condition

The UAE's population of wild olive trees (*Olea europaea*) numbers several hundred, all in the mountains west of Kalba and mostly found along north-facing ridges and gullies from 500 to 1000m in the area from Jebel Qitab west to Wadi Sfai. An early December visit showed them to be in worse shape than I have ever seen them, many largely leafless or with only interior leaves, and with some trees covered by a canopy of the climber *Cocculus pendulus*.

The reasons are speculative, although for once it does not seem possible to blame overbrowsing by goats (who have nevertheless devastated the vegetation of the lower



Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

Reptiles - Dr Reza Khan
res 344 8283
off 344 0462
fax (off) 349 9437

Archaeology - David Palmer
cell: 050-7387703
office direct line: 04-2072636

Birds - David Bradford
davebradford9@hotmail.com

Astronomy - Lamjed El-Kefi
res: 06-5247 958
off: 06-5583 003
email: lankefi@emirates.net.ae

Marine Life - Lamjed El-Kefi

Geology - Gary Feulner
res 306 5570
fax 330 3550

Insects - Gary Feulner

Fossils - Valerie Chalmers
res 349 4816,
fax 340 0990
vmc@latifaschool.co.ae

Plants - Valerie Chalmers

Mammals & Seashells - Recorders needed!

The recorders are not necessarily scientific experts in their designated fields. In fact, most are not. However, they are interested and knowledgeable amateurs - please contact them if you have any interesting reports or queries.

The intention is that information will be channelled through to the *Gazelle* editor, so new information can be shared with all our readers.



slopes, at least in the area of Wadi Mayy). Neither the olives nor other plants in this area appear to have benefited much from autumn showers, which have fallen intermittently over many mountain areas since August. The associated large shrub, *Ehretia obtusifolia*, was also nearly leafless. However, the last two winters have been (impressionistically) wetter than the 4 or 5 that went before, so one might have expected the olives to be recovering somewhat from the drought period, but in fact a visit in January 2003, following the peak of the drought, found them to be in better condition than at present.

So, are we seeing the accumulated effects of several years of sub-normal rains, regardless of annual variations? Or are we possibly seeing a broader phenomenon, perhaps evidence of more general climate change, and more specifically, global warming? Further observations will be necessary.

One piece of good news is that poor state of the vegetation generally has kept goats away from the summit areas and upper slopes, so that the olives and other vegetation has been left unmolested. A sure sign was that a few new olive shoots have normal leaves, rather than the smaller, rounder, dark green leaves that are produced in response to browsing. The goats will not stay away forever, but the trees may benefit from the small head start before their return. *Report by Gary Feulner*

Garden Bird Nests

Whilst in western Queensland, Australia, in October, Anne Millen (no birder!) was fascinated to see three very different nests in a tree by the house. One was a large mess of sticks, another a neat flat-bottomed mud bowl, and the third an even neater ball of pale pink fluff.

Photographs did not come out well (with a point-&-shoot with wide-angled lens!) but her brother, a keen observer of birds, was able to

identify them as those of the grey-crowned babbler, the white-winged chough and the blue-faced honey-eater respectively.



White-winged chough's nest



Blue-faced honeyeater's nest, made with pink feathers probably from galahs or Major Mitchell's cockatoos

Later, on her brother's property, she observed the same very untidy nest of sticks in a silky oak tree, and he also showed her just what variety there can be:



Grey-crowned babbler's nest



Double-barred finch's nest



White-winged triller's nest



White-naped honeyeater's nest

Back home in Dubai, Anne noticed three very different nests within a metre or two of one another, in her front courtyard.



Purple sunbird's nest

In the exposed outer branches of a bougainvillea, hung the classic tatty-but-neat nest of a purple sunbird (*Nectarinia asiatica*). This Anne was able to recognize because a pair had nested right outside her *Gazelle*-editing spot last spring, and she had frequently tried to photograph the little bird darting in and out. One moment there would be a tiny tail sticking out of the entrance, the next a blur of wings and nothing! Gary Feulner and Angela Manthorpe identified the nest in an instant in the dark, at a DHNG committee meeting!



High under the eaves, in the

branches of a potted ficus, was a small V-shaped, untidy nest of twigs (above). It seemed too small to be the nest of a white-cheeked bulbul (*Pycnonotus cafer*) but Anne had noticed the bulbuls paying a lot of attention to that tree last spring, and guessed they might have a nest there. One day, when she surprised one heading for the tree with something in its beak, it had fluttered down and hobbled off towards the other end of the garden, only to fly away. Does anyone recognise it as a white-cheeked bulbul's nest?

The third nest was different again.



Well hidden in an annual blue-flowered vine was a ball of twigs with a flap opening, lined inside with soft material that seemed too soft and fine to be cotton fluff and therefore was probably feathers or down. It was about 10cm in diameter, and attached to the flimsy stalks of the now-dead vine. Do our keen twitchers know what bird would build this nest? *Text and photographs by Helen Wainwright and, alas, Anne Millen.*

And last but not least, some more Members' News ...

Expanding business horizons are taking **Gillian** and **Rodney Hills** to Abu Dhabi. They intend to stay in touch, as they have enjoyed many lectures and field trips with the DHNG.

Our erstwhile, and very able, engineer **James Pardoe** is now in Birmingham, doing software work and computer graphics, and is enjoying it very much.

Anna and **Peter** Griffin, former Committee members, have moved to the west of France, in the Bordeaux area. Anna writes, "It is always such a treat to receive news of the DHNG. The climate here is so different from where we were in the south east, with a lot more rain. The bird life is wonderful; we regularly see hen harriers, buzzards, egrets as well as all the usual garden varieties."

Marijcke Jongbloed, too, sent news of France, together with glorious photographs, and details of a recently published book, *Discovering Qatar*, by Fran Gillespie, on which Marijcke worked as editor, designer and publisher. See below.

Book Review:

Discovering Qatar, by Frances Gillespie, contains over 200 photographs, mostly in colour, and 31 sections covering geology, topography, history, traditional culture and natural history of Qatar. Many of the pictures of wildlife were taken by well-known photographers working in the Gulf region. The author, Fran Gillespie, has lived in Qatar since 1985, and has spent many years studying the flora and fauna of the region. Fran has authored/co-authored three other books on Qatar and contributed reports and features on natural history subjects to the Gulf News newspaper for over 10 years. *Discovering Qatar* will be available this week at bookshops, (for the equivalent of QR100), and signed copies can be obtained by emailing gillespi@qatar.net.qa

Letters to the Editor

Do you have some comment, suggestion or query on natural history that you would like our members to know about or answer? Please send your letter to any of the committee members listed, by fax or e-mail, or direct to the editor, Anne Millen.



	name	tel home	tel office	fax
Chairman	Gary Feulner messages: 306 5300	306 5570	330 3600	330 3550
Vice Chairman	Valerie Chalmers e.mail: vmc@latifaschool.co.ae	349 4816	no calls pls	340 0990
Treasurer	Sim Hasker e.mail: haskers@hotmail.com	343 1076	050-5074691	
Membership Secretary	Lena Linton e.mail: linton@emirates.net.ae	050-474 3595		
Membership Assistant	Anindita Radhakrishna e.mail: anin@emirates.net.ae	282 3952	050-656 9165	
Speaker Co-ordinator	Angela Manthorpe e mail: manthorpe2005@yahoo.co.uk	288 6232		
Fieldtrip Co-ordinator	Pradeep Radhakrishna e.mail: wgarnet@emirates.net.ae	282 3952	050-450 8496	
Fieldtrip Co-ordinator	Peter Jackson email: pj.architect@gmail.com	2882713	335 4545 050-5521005	3354338
Fieldtrip Co-ordinator	Sandhya Prakash e.mail:sandhya@clavib.com	050-5512481		348 2868
Special Projects	Beryl Comar e.mail: comar@emirates.net.ae	344 2243		344 2243
Newsletter Editor	Anne Millen e.mail: pvana@emirates.net.ae	394 7076	no calls please	394 7075
Publisher	Peter van Amsterdam e.mail: pvana@emirates.net.ae	394 7076	335 5495	394 7075
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Postmaster	Sandi Ellis e.mail:peterjon@emirates.net.ae	050-644 2682		
Chief Engineer	<i>Position vacant</i>			

Sand Gazelles in Dubai

Can anyone tell us why there is a population of sand gazelle (*Gazella subgutturosa*) within a very large fenced area at the NE corner of the intersection of the Dubai–Al-Ain Road and the Jebel Ali–Hatta Road? Members en route to the Hatta field trip noticed them and stopped for a look on the way back, counting more than 40 sand gazelle within easy view. The enclosed area is at least several kilometres on a side.

Update on Access to Buraimi

The following update is based on current information from sources in Al-Ain, but is necessarily subject to change. Access to Buraimi from the Dubai side (Hili) now entails a semi-formal exit from Dubai, requiring a passport. On the assumption that visitors are going only to Buraimi, there is no paperwork required and

the Hili post does not put a UAE exit stamp in passports.

If you indicate that you wish to go further into Oman, then, according to reports, you will be sent to the Al-Shikla border post, past the Inter-Continental Hotel (near the Zarub Gap), or to the Mezyad border post, for a formal exit from the UAE.

Access to downtown Buraimi from the Al-Ain side is monitored by UAE border officials and potential visitors may be questioned. GCC nationals may enter Buraimi town from the main border crossing in downtown Al Ain (Kuwaitat district); all other passport holders are meant to use the Hili border crossing.

To confuse matters further, Oman is now constructing booths at the Hili and downtown border crossing

points. Hopefully this will facilitate the eventual use of both as entrance and exit points. But in the meantime, flexibility is required in order to enter and exit the Buraimi area, and attention is required in order to keep one's passport stamps in order.



Reem or sand gazelle
(from M. Beardwood's *Children's Encyclopaedia of Arabia*)

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

Lectures at Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management, 7.30 for 8.00pm

Jan 07 The UAE Insect Project – Dr. Antonius van Harten

Feb 04 Wildlife of the Sunderbans Mangrove Forest – Dr. Reza Khan

Field Trips (Members only, please. Details inside.)

Season's Greeting! No field trips scheduled for the holiday period.